

Correspondence

Letters should not exceed 400 words and should be typed double spaced (including the references) and be signed by all authors

TO THE EDITOR, *Genitourinary Medicine*

AIDS prevention: free condoms from an STD clinic in Copenhagen

Sir,

The use of condoms appears to be the most successful method of reducing the spread of human immunodeficiency virus (HIV) infection.^{1,2} Several investigations have shown that the distribution of free condoms has been well received by the public in general.^{3,4}

To stimulate the use of condoms and to provide information regarding prophylaxis against HIV infection the Municipality of Copenhagen has provided free condoms since 1987 to special target groups. Patients attending sexually transmitted disease (STD) clinics were considered to be such a group.

To obtain further information for future planning and adjustment of the campaign, we asked all outpatients with new symptoms of STD or requiring a check up who attended the STD department of the Rigshospital in Copenhagen during a period of 14 days in April of 1988 to complete a questionnaire. Participation was voluntary, and anonymity was ensured.

During the study period 62 patients attended the clinic. A total of 51 questionnaires were given out, and 47 were returned completed. The ratio of men to women was 1:0.5 and the mean age was 29 (range 20 to 51) years. The study population contained no intravenous drug users; two of the 31 men were homosexual or bisexual, and 40 patients stated that they had previously been tested for antibody to HIV and had had negative results.

The 47 patients included in the investigation were subdivided into two groups, those who had used condoms within the previous year (33) and those who had not (14). Those who had used condoms had each had four sexual partners a year; the corresponding figure for non-condom users was 3.1, a significant difference ($p < 0.05$). No less than 25 of those who used condoms reported that they had experienced a condom tearing or slipping off. Of the 14 who did not use condoms, eight stated that they did not use one because they had a stable partnership, and four said that it reduced their sexual desire or pleasure. None found that condoms were fun or sensual.

Of all those questioned, 29 thought that

the fear of contracting HIV infection had already changed their sexual habits. Six also thought that the campaign to supply free condoms would result in their changing their sexual behaviour to take greater precautions against catching HIV. The free distribution of condoms was considered by 39 to be important. To lessen the risk of HIV infection, 34 thought that condoms should be used, 14 that the number of partners should be reduced, and five considered a steady partnership desirable.

Study of the case records of all 62 patients showed that 28 had attended the department for a check up and 34 because they had symptoms of STD. Examination showed that none had syphilis, four gonorrhoea, 11 chlamydial infection, and 11 other acute STDs such as herpes genitalis or condyloma. An HIV test was carried out for 46 patients, none of whom had positive results.

We concluded that the patients comprising the study population were predominantly heterosexual and did not include any intravenous drug users. The sexual behaviour of patients attending STD clinics, however, places them at greater risk of infection with HIV.⁵ Our patients were well informed about HIV prevention, and many stated that they had already changed their sexual behaviour to avoid being exposed to HIV infection. A relatively large number, however, did not use condoms and, though many of them stated as their reason that they had a stable sexual relationship, more than half reported having had more than one sexual partner during the previous year.

The relatively large number of patients reporting having experienced condoms tearing indicates the need for more instruction in the use of condoms. The sexual behaviour of the group as a whole suggests that they were at a high risk of acquiring HIV infection. This can be seen clearly from the fact that 26 of the patients suffered from acute STD.

Thus there appears to be a pressing need for additional information regarding the risk of catching HIV and a definite need for a change in attitude in patients attending STD clinics. It is therefore gratifying to see that such patients have positive attitudes towards the campaign for the distribution of free condoms, and several stated that the campaign would positively influence their sexual behaviour. Despite this, there is an urgent need for further research, especially into

factors likely to bring about a change in sexual habits.

Financial support was provided by the AIDS fund of the National Board of Health and the Municipality of Copenhagen. We thank Dr T B Madsen, the Office of the Commissioner of Health, for his professional advice.

Yours faithfully,
Tonny Karlsmark*
Erling Segest†
Jacob Grindsted‡
Hans Bay§

*Department of Dermatology,
University of Copenhagen, Rigshospitalet,
†Office of the Commissioner of Health,
‡The University Library 2,
§The Ministry of Social Security,
Copenhagen, Denmark

References

- 1 Francis DP, Chin J. The prevention of acquired immunodeficiency syndrome in the United States. An objective strategy for medicine, public health, business and the community. *JAMA* 1987;257:1957-66.
- 2 Goldsmith MF. Sex in the age of AIDS calls for common sense and "condom sense". *JAMA* 1987;257:2261-6.
- 3 Buisman N, Chan MA, Currie T, Devereux F, Fanning B, Hawkins T, Holden H. AIDS: knowledge and attitudes in Otago. *NZ Med J* 1988;101:241-3.
- 4 Segest E, Hansen KC, Mygind O. Prevention of AIDS. A campaign in the Municipality of Copenhagen with issue of free condoms in general practice. *Ugeskr Laeger* 1988;150:3118-21.
- 5 Hull HF, Bettinger CJ, Gallaher MM, Keller NM, Wilson J, Mertz GJ. Comparison of HIV-antibody prevalence in patients consenting to and declining HIV-antibody testing in the STD clinic. *JAMA* 1988;260:935-8.

TO THE EDITOR, *Genitourinary Medicine*

Relevance of computed tomography to diagnose *Pneumocystis carinii* pneumonia

Sir,

The value of computed tomography (CT) for investigating neurological symptoms and detecting lymphomas in managing human immunodeficiency virus HIV infected patients is well known. In the case reported here, however, early CT of the thorax was useful in directing further clinical investigations in a patient with minimal symptoms